

Challenges in Malay essay writing: a qualitative study among non-native speakers in primary school

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses challenges faced by non-native speakers in primary school, specifically focusing on the proficiency of Malay essay writing skills. A qualitative study was conducted among five primary school teachers in the Kapit area of Sarawak, specializing in Malay language. They were selected through purposive sampling to actively participate in this study, bringing their expertise and experiences to enrich the research. The study involved meticulous conduction through semi-structured interviews, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo 12. The results revealed pervasive issues, including i) weak writing skills, ii) poor performance levels, iii) a lack of interest in writing, iv) inadequate language proficiency, v) limited vocabulary, and vi) ineffective idea processing. This study serves as a valuable resource for future researchers by providing insights into the complex challenges faced by non-native speakers in primary school. The identified issues offer a foundation for designing targeted interventions, pedagogical approaches, and curriculum enhancements to improve the writing skills and overall academic performance of non-native speakers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing skills are prominently emphasized and integral components of the Standard Malay Language Document [1]. Writing is regarded as one of the toughest language skills learners are expected to excel in since it prompts intellectual growth [2]. This statement is supported by Ghulamuddin *et al.* [3] and Suastra and Menggo [4] that mastering writing skills poses a considerable challenge for students as it necessitates cognitive abilities to generate ideas and translate them into written form. Beyond linguistic proficiency, students must possess adequate knowledge to express compelling ideas effectively [5]. Besides, the proficiency in essay writing among students is pivotal as it fosters idea generation, argumentation, and continuous development of ideas. Simultaneously, it trains students to craft well-structured essays with proper organization. Mastery of essay writing skills indirectly enables students to utilize correct language usage tailored to the required type of essays [6], [7].

The proficiency of non-native speakers in Malay language has been concerning, as evidenced by declining mastery in recent years. Research utilizing the Malay Language Proficiency Test has shown non-native speaker students lack proficiency in Malay language writing skills [8]. This study further reveals that even after six years in primary school, non-native speaker students still struggle with writing in Malay. Thus, continuous research into this issue aligns with the Second Shift of the Malaysian Education Development

Plan (2013-2025), aiming to ensure excellence in Malay language proficiency for all students. Proficiency in Malay language is crucial for fostering modern Malaysian civilization, as emphasized by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on quality education. Effective communication, critical thinking, and literacy skills fostered through writing are essential for achieving inclusive and equitable education, as outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. Prioritizing the development of writing skills in educational policies not only promotes the holistic growth of citizens but also contributes to the attainment of national and global SDGs.

Despite the acknowledged importance of writing skills, the current issue lies in the inherent difficulty of writing, which is considered the most challenging skill for non-native speakers. They are required to possess a certain level of second language background knowledge, encompassing rhetorical organization, appropriate language usage, and specific lexicon, to effectively communicate with their readers. Past studies have shown that non-native students encounter problems in Malay essay writing [8]–[11]. These studies found that non-native students struggled in their writing tasks because of their insufficient competence in writing skills, especially in Malay essay writing. It's crucial to investigate the underlying cause of the issue sooner, allowing for more effective treatment or intervention during the formative years of the students when their ability to absorb is heightened. Thus, this paper intends to fill the gap by examining the challenges faced by non-native students at the primary school level in writing and helping teachers find suitable teaching strategies that can be implemented in the classroom to enhance their essay writing skills in future studies.

Despite the recognized importance of writing skills, non-native speakers face significant challenges due to the complexity of writing. This skill requires a background in the second language, including rhetorical organization, appropriate language usage, and specific lexicon, to communicate effectively. Previous studies [8]–[11] have shown that non-native students struggle with Malay essay writing due to insufficient writing competence. Addressing this issue early is crucial for effective intervention during students' formative years when their ability to absorb new information is heightened. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the challenges faced by non-native primary school students in writing and helping teachers develop suitable teaching strategies to enhance essay writing skills in future studies. One primary challenge for teachers is the limited vocabulary of non-native students, which hinders the construction of grammatically correct sentences and leads to various language-related issues [12]–[15]. The failure to master adequate vocabulary results in sentences that are difficult to understand [16]. Furthermore, non-native students struggle with preparing and processing essay ideas, as highlighted by [3], [10], [15]. These studies indicate that students' ability to generate and process ideas remains weak, resulting in poorly written essays that lack essential content and clarity. Additionally, students face problems with cohesion and coherence in their writing, which are crucial for linking paragraphs and ensuring the continuity of ideas throughout an essay. Studies by Ali *et al.* [10], Mora *et al.* [17], and Sitorus *et al.* [18] reveal that students struggle to connect introductory paragraphs with the body of the essay, leading to content that does not meet the requirements of the question and lacks relevance to the essay topic.

The primary objective of this study is to identify the specific challenges non-native speakers encounter in mastering essay writing skills. By investigating these challenges, the research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and inform the development of more effective instructional strategies and support mechanisms to improve writing proficiency. Additionally, the findings may inform curriculum development efforts aimed at fostering holistic language competencies among students.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is one of the research types which explores the problem and develops a detailed understanding of central phenomenon [19]. The qualitative method, specifically semi-structured interviews, is utilized to gather information [20], [21].

2.2. Research instrument

The research instrument used in this qualitative study is semi-structured interview protocol. This semi-structured interview protocol is designed for interviews with five Malay language teachers. For validity and reliability, the interview questions have been reviewed and validated by three experts with expertise and experience in qualitative research.

2.3. Study participants

Purposive sampling was employed in this study by selecting participants involved in the teaching and learning of Malay essay writing. Purposive sampling is deemed the most suitable method as participants can provide comprehensive information until saturation is reached [19], [22]. For this study, a total of five

Malay language teachers in the Kapit district were selected as study participants. The selection was based on predetermined criteria, requiring a minimum of five years of experience teaching Malay language, and currently teaching Level 2 classes. In addition, these schools primarily instruct students from the Iban ethnic community who communicate in their mother tongue.

2.4. Data collection method

The researcher asked the participants about the criteria required for participation, including a minimum of five years of experience teaching the Malay language and currently teaching Level 2 classes among teachers. Once the teachers had fulfilled the participation criteria, the researcher selected those who met the requirements as participants. Following this, the researcher sought their willingness to participate, and fortunately, all participants agreed. Subsequently, the researcher arranged agreements and appointments with the participants regarding the date, time, and location for conducting the interviews, which were conducted via WhatsApp. The interviews took place at a school and lasted one month to gather data from all participants. The researcher conducted the interviews in Malay as it facilitated communication between the researcher and participants. A cell phone was used to record audio and collect data from the participants, with each interview lasting thirty to forty-five minutes.

2.5. Data analysis

Thematic analysis is used to analyze qualitative data in this study, and data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed inductively and deductively. The data were also analyzed using NVivo 12 software. The data analysis process commenced with coding the text and assigning labels to the text, followed by coding the text into identified themes [23]. To ensure the reliability of the findings, peer review was conducted to obtain agreement on the interview data and subsequently the generated themes. Furthermore, Cohen's Kappa analysis involving three experts was carried out to determine the agreement values on the generated themes for data reliability.

3. RESULTS

This section addresses the primary research question: What challenges do non-native speakers face in mastering Malay essay writing skills? According to the data in Table 1, common obstacles include weak writing skills, poor performance levels, and a lack of interest in writing, as identified by multiple teachers. Additionally, non-native speakers struggle with a limited vocabulary and inadequate proficiency in language aspects. Ineffective idea processing further hinders their ability to compose coherent essays. These challenges highlight the need for targeted interventions to improve the essay writing skills of non-native students. Based on interviews conducted with participants, several significant themes will be discussed based on teachers' perspectives and ideas. The analysis of interview transcription data revealed the following themes:

Table 1. Challenges in mastering Malay essay writing skills

Challenges	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5
Weak writing skills	/	/	/	/	/
Poor performance level	/	/	/	/	/
A lack of interest in writing	/	/	/	/	/
Lack of vocabulary	/	/	/	/	/
Inadequate language aspect proficiency	/	/	/	/	/
Ineffective idea processing	/	/	/	/	/

3.1. Weak writing skills

The findings of the teacher interviews indicate that non-native speakers are observed to possess weaknesses in employing correct sentence structures. This condition indirectly impacts the quality of their essay writing. Furthermore, reading and writing skills are closely intertwined. Deficiencies in students' reading skills hinder their ability to translate ideas into writing. Inability to translate the information read results in writing that is challenging to comprehend and conveys divergent meanings. This statement is based on the interview transcript as follows:

"Some are proficient in reading but struggle to translate into writing, leading to differing meanings." (Teacher 1)

"Students who cannot read certainly cannot write." (Teacher 2)

"The most challenging writing skill for them to master is particularly constructing sentences with proper structure." (Teacher 4)

"The difficulty for them to master lies in writing with proper sentence structure in their essay compositions." (Teacher 5)

3.2. Poor performance level

Continuous assessment and targeted guidance play a pivotal role in ensuring students attain high performance in writing. Insights from teacher interviews highlight a significant concern: the removal of standardized assessments like the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) or primary school evaluation test and the lack of consistent instructional support have markedly diminished students' writing proficiency. Teachers observed that without these structured evaluations and ongoing guidance, students struggle to develop essential writing skills and maintain their academic standards. These findings underscore the critical need for reinstating comprehensive assessment frameworks and providing continuous, focused support to enhance students' writing capabilities and overall academic achievement. This statement is supported by the findings of the interviews as follows:

"The writing performance of Level 2 students is still unsatisfactory due to the recent abolition of UPSR." (Teacher 1)

"After the UPSR assessment was abolished, students no longer seem to prioritize their learning, and their writing performance could be considered unsatisfactory." (Teacher 2)

"I can say it's very weak because they cannot construct grammatically correct sentences." (Teacher 3)

"Currently, there is no emphasis on writing, and I would say their performance level is unsatisfactory due to the absence of UPSR assessments." (Teacher 4)

"After the pandemic and the abolition of assessment for Year 6 students, where the students' performance has declined and unsatisfactory." (Teacher 5)

3.3. A lack of interest in writing

The findings of the interviews reveal that students lack interest in essay writing and perceive it as difficult to master. Teachers state that this lack of interest is due to students' limited critical thinking abilities and difficulties in constructing sentences and essay formats, which are considered challenging. These insights collectively emphasize the need for strategies to simplify essay writing and boost student confidence and interest in developing their writing skills. This statement is based on the interview transcript as follows:

"The writing of this essay is quite challenging for them and even constructing sentences is not yet proficient. This causes them to appear less interested." (Teacher 1)

"They are not interested because the essay writing is difficult in terms of essay format and also constructing sentences." (Teacher 2)

"They seem less interested because they don't want to write much even though it's only 120 words." (Teacher 3)

"They feel that essay writing is quite difficult, and when they perceive something as difficult, they seem uninterested in doing it." (Teacher 4)

3.4. Lack of vocabulary

Interview findings from teachers revealed that students tend to use their mother tongue and foreign languages in their essay writing, resulting in a lack of vocabulary. This includes the selection of inappropriate words in their essays, causing the content to deviate from the intended topic or question requirements. Furthermore, the lack of vocabulary also impacts the quality of sentences written by students. These findings are elucidated through interview transcripts as follows:

"Students who read less tend to have a lack of vocabulary, leading them to use their native language in their essays." (Teacher 1)

"There is a mixture of their native language vocabulary in their writing." (Teacher 2)

"The students tend to mix their languages, resulting in ungrammatical sentences that are difficult to understand." (Teacher 3)

"They tend to use their native language, causing the content of the essay to not adhere to the essay topic." (Teacher 4)

"It cannot be denied that they always face problems in constructing sentences and selecting inappropriate words, which consequently have an impact on essay writing." (Teacher 5)

3.5. Ineffective idea processing

The findings of the interviews reveal that non-native students face challenges in the generation and processing of ideas. When they are unable to generate ideas effectively, it indirectly affects the outcome of their essay writing. According to the teachers, the students find it is difficult in writing lengthy essays and

adhering to question requirements are usually due to their limited ideas. The interview findings with students indicate a tendency to repeat content, lack confidence in presenting ideas, and difficulty in translating ideas into Malay. These findings are elucidated through transcripts of participant interviews as follows:

“In terms of content, their essays contain a lot of repetition. For example, what was already stated in the first paragraph about the intended message is reiterated in the subsequent paragraphs, resulting in a lack of content development.” (Teacher 1)

“They still struggle to present ideas or content for a given essay.” (Teacher 2)

The teachers also stated that the weak idea processing is due to students lacking confidence in presenting content. They believe that students are afraid of making mistakes in presenting accurate content. These findings are explained through transcripts of participant interviews as follows:

“It can be said that the ideas generated are quite limited, and they appear to have less confidence in presenting any idea or content.” (Teacher 4)

“Their essays lack content entirely because they fear making mistakes and lack confidence in themselves.” (Teacher 5)

Students also find it difficult to articulate ideas in Malay and are more inclined to express ideas in their native language. The difficulty students face in presenting coherent ideas in Malay results in less engaging essay compositions. These findings are elucidated through interview transcripts as follows:

“They struggle to articulate ideas, especially in Malay, which sometimes leads to direct translations from their native language.” (Teacher 1)

“The ideas are there, but they are presented in Iban. When they try to translate them into Malay, it becomes one of the issues they encounter.” (Teacher 2)

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by non-native speakers from the Iban ethnic group in Malay essay writing. Furthermore, teachers, especially those teaching Malay language subjects, can utilize these findings to enhance the teaching and learning process in Malay essay writing. By addressing the identified challenges and providing adequate support, teachers can help non-native speakers improve their proficiency in Malay writing, thereby fostering academic success and language development.

The findings show that the teachers emphasized the significance of assessments like the UPSR and continuous guidance in shaping students' writing proficiency. The absence of such assessments and ongoing support has been identified as a contributing factor to students' overall poor performance in writing [24], [25]. Continuous assessment serves as a vital tool for monitoring students' progress and identifying areas for improvement in learning [26]–[28]. Through regular assessments, teachers can gauge students' proficiency levels, track their development over time, and provide targeted feedback to address specific writing challenges. Moreover, assessments like the UPSR provide standardized benchmarks for evaluating students' writing skills, offering valuable insights into their readiness for higher levels of education. The absence of assessments like the UPSR and continuous guidance deprives students of essential feedback and support mechanisms necessary for writing improvement. Without regular assessments, students may lack clear benchmarks for their writing progress, making it difficult for them to identify areas of weakness and track their growth. Therefore, efforts should be made to integrate regular assessments and continuous guidance into writing instruction to ensure students receive the support they need to succeed in writing.

The lack of interest in writing essays among non-native students presents a significant challenge in language education, especially in second language acquisition contexts [6], [7]. The findings show that non-native students often exhibit disinterest in essay writing due to students limited critical thinking abilities and difficulties in constructing sentences and essay formats. This statement is in line with [29]–[31] that limited critical thinking abilities hinder students' capacity to analyse information, synthesize ideas, and develop coherent arguments, all of which are essential skills for effective essay writing. Without the ability to critically evaluate and organize thoughts, students may struggle to articulate their ideas in a structured and logical manner, resulting in frustration and disinterest in writing essays. Additionally, difficulties in constructing sentences and essay formats further compound the problem. Students who struggle with sentence construction may find it challenging to convey their ideas clearly, while those grappling with essay formats may feel overwhelmed by the technical aspects of writing. Therefore, teachers should be creative in designing effective strategies and techniques for essay writing to engage the interest of non-native students in Malay essay writing.

The research findings indicate that non-native students face challenges in vocabulary deficiency. This limitation of vocabulary hinders students' proficiency in essay writing [32], [33]. A rich vocabulary is fundamental to constructing grammatically correct sentences and is essential to effective writing skills [34]. Iban ethnic students are found to struggle in using Malay vocabulary effectively in essay writing, leading to the production of ungrammatical sentences and content that does not adhere to the essay's topic. This observation is supported by studies conducted by [3], [10], [35], [36] which suggest that inappropriate vocabulary selection impacts students' sentences and results in essays that do not meet the topic or question requirements. Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in supporting the vocabulary development of non-native students by implementing various effective teaching and learning strategies in essay writing.

Besides, non-native students also often face challenges in mastering various aspects of language, including grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, and discourse markers. Having good ability in the language aspect will lead to producing high-quality essay writing [7], [37], [38]. One of the primary implications of inadequate language aspect proficiency is its impact on students' ability to produce coherent and effective written texts. This statement is supported by Ali *et al.* [10], indicating that non-native students with inadequate proficiency in language aspects may struggle to construct grammatically correct sentences, select appropriate vocabulary, and apply punctuation and discourse markers effectively. As a result, their essays may lack clarity, coherence, and cohesion, hindering their communication of ideas and arguments. Teachers should modify their teaching methods to engage students' interest in learning Malay essay writing, especially among Iban ethnic students who are learning Malay as a second language.

The research findings also indicate that non-native students, particularly those from the Iban ethnic group, encounter challenges in generating and processing essay content effectively. Mastering the generation and processing of ideas is a critical component of successful essay writing, with profound implications for students' academic performance and cognitive development [39]. The ability to generate ideas is the foundation of essay writing; it enables students to create a broad range of content that can be structured into a coherent argument. However, processing ideas using grammatically correct sentences and engaging language proves to be somewhat difficult for Iban ethnic students. This issue arises due to essay writing being the most complex and challenging skill in the Malay language for students to master [5], [40], [41]. Iban ethnic students face difficulty in refining their ideas into an engaging essay due to their lack of confidence in expressing ideas in Malay and the influence of their native language, which disrupts the idea generation process. Past studies have also highlighted similar issues in idea generation and processing among students from other ethnic groups, such as studies conducted among Chinese students by Zhang [42], and Zhang and Liu [43], Bajau ethnic students in Sabah by Ali *et al.* [10], and Melanau ethnic students in Sarawak by Jee and Aziz [44]. Therefore, teachers should design effective methods or approaches to assist non-native students in generating and processing essay ideas or content effectively.

5. CONCLUSION

The research provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by non-native Iban ethnic students in mastering Malay essay writing. The findings suggest that targeted teaching methods could address these challenges, enhancing students' proficiency. Key insights highlight the importance of structured assessments, such as the UPSR, and the necessity of continuous instructional guidance to foster improved writing skills, as the absence of such measures correlates with poor performance. A significant impediment is the lack of interest in essay writing, often attributed to limited critical thinking skills and difficulties in constructing coherent sentences and essays. Furthermore, a deficiency in vocabulary hampers students' ability to select appropriate words and construct meaningful sentences. These challenges in mastering various language aspects negatively impact the quality of written work. The influence of the native Iban language and a lack of confidence in expressing ideas in Malay further complicate content generation and processing for these students. Adapting teaching methods to better engage non-native students and support them in overcoming these hurdles is essential. Future research should expand geographically and include diverse learning environments and larger sample sizes to enrich the data. Employing a quantitative approach alongside qualitative methods could yield more reliable findings. Collaborative efforts among educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders are vital for developing comprehensive language education initiatives that cater to the diverse linguistic needs of students in Malaysia.

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